

PROFILES OF North Dakota Big Game

By Bill Jensen

Each year I receive a variety of phone calls from public with questions about the life history of our big game species. These questions range from: "when is the peak of the pronghorn rut?" to "I am setting up my archery targets to practice for my once in a life-time special big game hunt, so what is the average height of an elk at the shoulder?" The following information was put together to answer these and other questions about the seven big game species that help make North Dakota a special place to live.

WHITE-TAILED DEER

Genus species: *Odocoileus virginianus*

Description: Height: averages 36 inches at the shoulder (Range 30-40 inches). Weight: Bucks average 170 pounds (range 100-330 pounds); does average 130 pounds (range 90-210 pounds). Color: Coat reddish in summer and blue-gray in winter, with white on throat, belly, and underside of tail. Antlers: On males only, main beams turning out to sides then sweep forward, several tines projecting off the main beam.

Habitat: Forested areas and farmland (particularly fond of alfalfa and row crops).

Range: Found throughout North Dakota, most common in eastern half of the state.

Mating: Breeding peaks in mid-November, with bucks tending one doe at a time. No permanent pair bonds. Gestation averages 202 days (range 187-222 days).

Young: One to three fawns (usually two) born late May to late June, and weighing about seven pounds. Coat reddish with white spots on back.

Habits: Most active at dawn and dusk. Does often socialize in small groups with related females from several generations. Outside of the breeding season, bucks usually alone or in small bachelor groups.

Fun Facts: *White-tailed deer are the most common big game animal found in North Dakota. There are more white-tailed deer now than when Lewis and Clark traveled through the state in 1804-1806.*

MULE DEER

Genus species: *Odocoileus hemionus*

Description: Height: averages 39 inches at the shoulder (range 30-42 inches). Weight: Bucks average 170 pounds (range 125-330 pounds); does average 140 pounds (range 110-210 pounds). Color: Coat reddish brown in summer and blue-gray in winter, with white throat, belly, and rump patch. Tail slender and white with a black tip. Antlers: On males only, main beams divide into nearly equal branches, and may divide again to form four or more tines on each side.

Habitat: Sagebrush plains and short grass prairie associated with buttes and rough badlands terrain.

Range: Primarily found in the badlands adjacent to the Little Missouri River. Secondary range extending north and east to the breaks along the Missouri River.

Mating: Breeding peaks in mid-November, with bucks tending one doe at a time. No permanent pair bonds.



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White-tailed Deer

Mule Deer



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Gestation averages 204 days (range 183-218 days).

Young: One to three fawns (usually two) born late May to late June, and weighing about eight pounds. Coat reddish brown with white spots on back.

Habits: Most active at dawn and dusk. Does often socialize in small groups with related females from several generations. Outside of the breeding season, bucks usually alone or in small bachelor groups.

Fun Facts: When alarmed mule deer often flee with a bouncing gait. This bouncing gait is called "stotting." Mule deer were given their name because of their large ears.

PRONGHORN

Genus species: *Antilocapra americana*

Description: Height: averages 35 inches at the shoulder (range 32-41 inches). Weight: Bucks average 120 pounds (range 100-135 pounds); does average 110 pounds (range 90-125 pounds). Color: Coat rusty brown and tan, with white neckbands, belly, and rump patch. Black cheek patch on males. Horns: On males horns extend past the ears (often 12 inches or more), curving back with single prong rising from the upper half of the horn and pointing forward. Horns on females consist of only a small cone less than an inch long.

Habitat: Sagebrush plains and short-grass prairie associated with level open terrain.

Range: Primary range in the extreme southwestern part of the state (Bowman and Slope counties), with diminishing numbers north and east. Uncommon to rare north and east of the Missouri River.

Mating: Breeding peaks in mid September, with bucks tending harems of 5-20 or more does at a time. No permanent pair bonds. Gestation averages 252 days (delayed implantation of the egg).

Young: One to three fawns (usually two) born late May to late June, and weighing about eight pounds. Coat tan, with black on hair tips.

Habits: Most active at dawn and dusk, but frequently seen in the open throughout the day. Does usually in groups of 10 or more. Outside of the breeding season, male usually in small bachelor groups.

Fun Facts: Reaching speeds of more than 40 miles per hour; pronghorn are the fastest land mammal in North America. Pronghorn are the only living member of the family Antilocapridae.

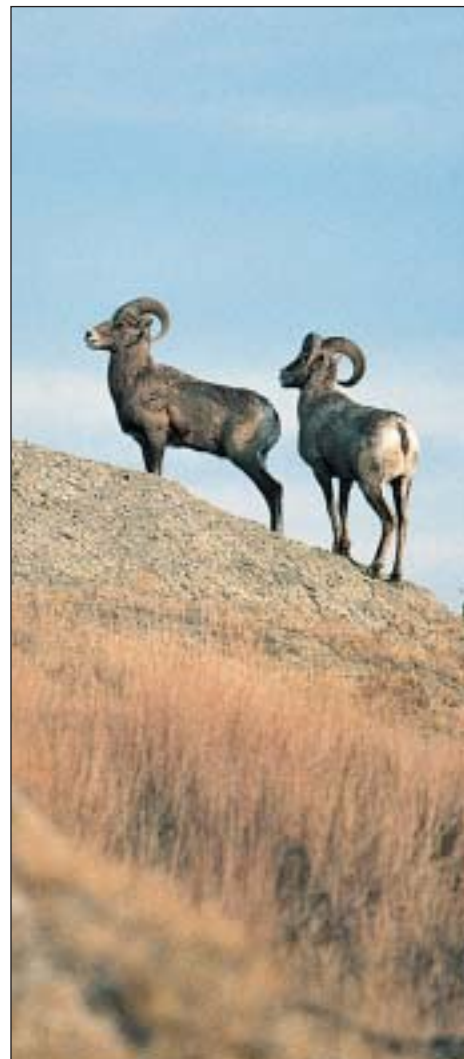
BIGHORN SHEEP

Genus species: *Ovis canadensis*

Description: Height: averages 36 inches and 40 inches at the shoulder for ewes and rams, respectively. Weight: Rams average 200 pounds (range 120-250 pounds); ewes average 125 pounds (range 105-145 pounds). Color: Coat grayish brown with cream-colored belly and large white rump patch. Horns: males have massive coil shaped horns that spiral back and out to form a complete arc, more than 30 inches in length, ewes have much smaller sickle shaped horns 8-10 inches long.

Habitat: Highly dependent upon steep, open, escape terrain on the sides of large buttes where lambs are secure from coyotes and other predators.

Range: Currently free ranging animals are found only in steep badlands terrain



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Bighorn Sheep

Pronghorn



Ed Bry

Elk

along the Little Missouri River.

Mating: Breeding peaks between early November and early December, with rams tending harems of 10 to 20 ewes. No permanent pair bonds. Gestation averages about 174 days.

Young: One lamb (rarely two) usually born in early May (range from late April to early June), and weighing about 8-10 pounds. Coat grayish brown.

Habits: Most active feeding at dawn and dusk, but may be seen in midday on exposed escape terrain. Gregarious. Ewes usually in groups of 10 or more animals. Outside of the breeding season, males are alone or in small bachelor groups.

Fun Facts: Bighorns are the least common big game species in North Dakota. The total population is between 200 and 300 animals. This animal was first recorded for science on the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1805 along the Yellowstone River in what is now North Dakota.

ELK

Genus species: *Cervus elaphus*

Description: Height: averages 53 inches and 59 inches at the shoulder for cows and bulls, respectively. Weight: Bulls average 700 pounds (range 470-1,100 pounds); cows average 500 pounds (range 440-600 pounds). Color: Coat reddish-brown, neck dark brown, small white tail, yellowish belly and rump patch. Antlers: On males only, main beam extending over the back with several tines off the main beam.

Habitat: Highly adaptable. Able to flourish in most habitats from dry sagebrush grasslands to forested river bottoms. Fond of crops such as alfalfa and row crops.

Range: Currently free ranging animals

are found only in the badlands, Killdeer Mountains area, and in Cavalier County (northeastern North Dakota).

Mating: Breeding peaks in mid to late September, with bulls tending harems of usually 15 to 20 or more cows. No permanent pair bonds. Gestation averages about 250 days.

Young: One calf (rarely two) born late May to early June, and weighing about 37 pounds. Coat reddish with white spots on back.

Habits: Most active at dawn and dusk. Gregarious, cows usually in groups of 10 or more. Outside of the breeding season, males are alone or in small bachelor groups.

Fun Facts: Elk are also called wapiti, a Shawnee Indian name meaning white deer (referring to their bleached out white coat in the spring). Elk are the only species of North American deer that usually have upper canine teeth (often called bugler teeth).

MOOSE

Genus species: *Alces alces*

Description: Height: averages about 73 inches and 77 inches at the shoulder for adult cows and bulls, respectively. Weight: Bulls average 890 pounds (range 550-1,300 pounds); cows average 880 pounds (range 600-1,160 pounds). Color: Coat black, legs dark brown to gray. Large nose with overhanging snout, pendent "bell" on throat. Antlers: On males only, main beam extends out and back, palmate with small tines protruding from the edges of each palm.

Habitat: Most accustomed to aspen and boreal forests with lakes and wetlands. Moose have extended their range into the prairie where forested river bottoms and



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tree rows provide browse. Fond of row crops such as sunflowers and corn.

Range: Currently free ranging animals are found primarily in the Turtle Mountains and along forested rivers in the northeastern quarter of North Dakota. Scattered family units frequently found along the Canadian border and eastern third of the state where forested river bottoms and tree rows provide sufficient browse.

Mating: Breeding peaks in late September and early October, with bulls tending individual cows; at times may defend harems. No permanent pair bonds. Gestation averages about 231 days (range 216-264 days).

Young: One to two calves born mid-May to mid-June, and weighing about 32 pounds. Coat dark brown.

Habits: Most active at dawn and dusk. Cows usually only accompanied by calves, or in small groups. Outside of the breeding season, males alone or in small bachelor groups.

Fun Facts: Moose are the largest member of the deer family. There are probably more moose now than when Lewis and Clark traveled through the state in 1804-1806.



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Moose

BISON

Genus species: *Bison bison*

Description: Height: averages 61 inches and 70 inches at the shoulder for cows and bulls, respectively. Weight: Bulls average 1,600 pounds (range 1,200-2,000 pounds); cows average 950 pounds (range 700-1,200 pounds). Color: Coat black to brown with longer hair on head, shoulders and

forelegs. Horns: male horns tend to grow outward from the skull and extend upward with large bases; female horns tend to be slender with a greater tendency for the tips of the horns to curve inward. Massive bodies with large hump over shoulders.

Habitat: Graze most frequently in open mixed and shortgrass prairies on grasses and forbs.

Range: Currently free ranging animals are found only in Theodore Roosevelt

National Park in western North Dakota.

Mating: Breeding between late June through September (peak of the rut in late July), with bulls tending harems of cows, but having a one-on-one relationship, tending specific cows in estrus. No permanent pair bonds. Gestation averages about 285 days.

Young: One calf (rarely two) usually born in late April (range from mid-April to late May), and weighing about 45 pounds. Coat bright reddish-tan.

Habits: Gregarious. Cows, calves and young males usually in groups of 10 or more animals. Outside of the breeding season, males are alone or in pairs.

Fun Facts: Once the most common big game animal on the plains, this species is now managed as "domestic livestock". Although the largest wild mammal in the state, they are remarkably agile. Bison can reach speed of 35 miles per hour for brief spurts and run at a trot for hours.

BILL JENSEN is a big game biologist with the department and a frequent contributor to North Dakota OUTDOORS.

Bison



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